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Uranium: Giving in to Gandhi

Jimmy Carter's cave-in to the government of Indira Gandhi—by approving the sale of uranium to India without the safeguards enacted into law by Congress—has been the subject of grumbling on Capitol Hill.

But the extent of Carter's capitulation has not been made public. U.S. Ambassador to India Robert Goheen secretly briefed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the matter in June. His testimony indicated that the Carter administration's reasons for giving India free rein to use American nuclear fuel for atomic bombs are either disingenuous or self-deluding.

The public argument the administration has made is that refusal to sell the uranium to India would mean the end of U.S. influence over India's nuclear development. But in a secret memorandum uncovered by my associate Dale Van Atta, Goheen admits there is virtu-

ally no U.S. control over India and its use of nuclear technology.

The Carter administration knows this, of course. But what is far more important, the Indian government knows it—and every nation that buys nuclear fuel from the United States will now realize that President Carter doesn't really mean it when he proclaims his determination to discourage the spread of nuclear weapons capability.

Under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Act of 1978, any nation seeking to buy uranium from the United States must either sign the international treaty banning the spread of nuclear weapons or agree to open its atomic facilities to international inspection, the purpose of which is to prove that plutonium from spent nuclear fuel is not being diverted to nuclear weapons.

Ironically, the Indians' detonation of a nuclear device in 1974 was what

moved Congress to pass the legislation. Yet India steadfastly refuses either to sign the non-proliferation treaty or to agree to open its nuclear plants for outside inspection. And barring a veto by majority votes in both House and Senate, Carter is prepared to let the Indians get away with it.

The State Department—and India—justify the sale of 38 tons of enriched uranium under a 1963 treaty by which the United States agreed to supply the fuel necessary to keep an American-built nuclear power plant operating at Tarapur. They argue that the congressional restrictions didn't take effect until last March, and thus should not apply to a prior agreement.

According to a Senate summary of a secret cable India sent last March 7, "India stated that it would continue to abide by its obligations under the [1963] cooperation agreement so long as ex-

ports for Tarapur are received on a timely basis, but that India could not accept continued delay and uncertainty."

This thinly veiled threat to take its nuclear fuel business elsewhere was enough to bluff the Carter administration. Goheen tried to put the best face possible on the administration's cave-in. According to the secret Senate memorandum, he gave "two sets of reasons for approving the fuel shipments to Tarapur: maintaining existing controls over Tarapur, and the 'significant' influence the United States exerts over the Indian nuclear program; and to respond to Mrs. Gandhi's desire for good relations."

But in another, highly classified memo, Goheen conceded that the United States has virtually no influence over the Gandhi government, and that the "controls" at Tarapur are almost non-existent. That leaves only the "desire for good relations" as a legitimate

reason for providing the uranium.

Looking on the bright side, Goheen told the senators that the Central Intelligence Agency has "no evidence that India is actually pursuing the option of another nuclear detonation." Under questioning, however, he admitted what Mrs. Gandhi has proclaimed publicly: that "India will not give a commitment not to conduct a nuclear explosion."

Carter's efforts to establish good relations with the Gandhi government have met with repeated rebuffs from New Delhi. The very suggestion that the United States might not obediently send its annual supply of uranium without assurances from India touched off outrage in the Indian press and official circles. The United States was treating India "unfairly," the government-inspired editorial writers complained.

Adding insult to injured innocence, the Gandhi government announced in

late May that the Soviet Union had agreed to provide \$1.6 billion worth of new weapons for the Indian military on easy credit terms. Goheen told the senators: "The United States was aware of the negotiations for this purchase for some time, but was surprised and disturbed by the timing of the announcement." The Soviet arms deal was announced, curiously, just days after the Nuclear Regulatory Commission unanimously voted to deny the uranium sale.

It's bad enough that India has demonstrated how to play the two superpowers off against each other to its own advantage. It's downright humiliating, though, when a nation that clearly needs our help demonstrates to the whole world that the way to get what it wants from the United States is simply to say no to its demands.

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